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ABSTRACT

This study examines faculty turnover intent in an urban community college, with a specific focus on the relationship between turnover intent and three structural variables: level of faculty autonomy, amount of support for faculty innovation, and degree of communication openness in the college. Turnover intent is defined as the degree of likelihood that an employee will terminate his/her membership in a work organization. The author identifies numerous career stressors that are particularly prevalent among urban community college faculty (e.g., increasing external demands, difficulty establishing a college community) and highlights the potential influence of these factors on faculty turnover intentions. Expectancy theory serves as the theoretical foundation for this study, which seeks to identify specific organizational structures that enhance faculty retention rates. A cross-sectional survey that measured turnover intent, work autonomy, organizational support for innovation, and communication openness was distributed to all full-time faculty members of an urban community college. Data analysis revealed a strong, negative relationship between organizational support for innovation and faculty turnover intent, but it did not find collegial communication or work autonomy to be significant. The researcher also noted that respondents aged 20-39 reported higher levels of turnover intent than their older colleagues. (Contains 53 references and 3 tables.) (RC)

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Turnover intent in an urban community college:
Strategies for faculty retention

A 2000 TIAA-CREF survey found that more than 40% of full-time faculty members had seriously considered switching careers (Sanderson, Phua, & Herda, 2000). High rates of faculty dissatisfaction and turnover can be costly to the reputation of an institution and to the quality of instruction (McBride, Munday, & Tunnell, 1992). Institutional effectiveness is diminished when courses cannot be offered or projects cannot be completed because of faculty turnover. Under conditions of high turnover, faculty morale is likely to suffer, and the quality of student-faculty interactions – a key factor in college student retention – will be affected.

Researchers in sociology, psychology, and higher education have identified a range of stressors that contribute to faculty propensity to leave, including lack of autonomy, limited support for innovation, and a diminished a sense of community (Barnes, Agago, & Coombs, 1998; Johnsrud & Rosser, 2000; Manger & Eikeland, 1990; Matier, 1990; Smart, 1990). Some evidence suggests that these career stressors may be particularly prevalent in urban community colleges. First, urban community colleges are under significant pressure to set priorities. Their urban location exposes them to a greater variety and larger number of external demands (Lynton, 1996; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). For example, workforce training and developmental education needs are extensive in urban areas (Bosworth, 1997; Fitzgerald & Jenkins, 1997; Roueche, Ely, & Roueche, 2001). Pressures for accountability, in turn, may delimit the range of faculty autonomy, as external forces increasingly control organizational behavior. Second, though community colleges have been deemed the most innovative sector of higher education (O'Banion,

1997), the extent of support for faculty-initiated change varies substantially. Community college leadership has traditionally been viewed as more authoritarian and "top-down" than other sectors, and faculty participation in governing and changing these institutions may be limited (Kezar, 1998; Thaxter & Graham, 1999). Finally, urban institutions face particular challenges in developing a sense of community. The prevalence of night and weekend courses makes difficult the task of scheduling time for faculty to interact and work together. The bifurcation of the transfer and workforce development functions and the extensive use of a contingent academic labor force may also forestall efforts to build a sense of community in these institutions.

The purpose of this study was to examine faculty turnover intent in an urban community college. Turnover intent refers to the degree of likelihood that an employee will terminate his/her membership in a work organization. Conversely, intent-to-stay refers to the extent to which an employee plans to continue membership with his/her employer (Kim, Price, Mueller, & Watson, 1996). Specifically, this study explored the relationship between faculty turnover intent and three structural variables: level of faculty autonomy, amount of support for faculty innovation, and degree of communication openness in the college.

Theoretical Framework

The selection of structural variables was based on expectancy theory (Lawler, 1994; Porter & Lawler, 1968; Vroom, 1964). Basic to the idea of expectancy theory is the notion that people "enter work organizations with expectations and values, and if these expectations and values are met, they will likely remain a member of the organization"

(Kim, et al., 1996, p. 949). Thus, people have certain expectations for the structural properties of work. When these structural expectations are met, people tend to report higher levels of intent to stay, and organizations are likely to experience lower levels of turnover.

This structural approach to the study of turnover intent differs from the psychological approach taken by other researchers of faculty propensity to leave (e.g., Johnsrud & Rosser, 2000). The psychological approach focuses on faculty satisfaction and levels of organizational morale. Invariably, these studies find that high levels of satisfaction decrease turnover intent (Price, 1997). Such findings, however, do not reveal the mechanisms by which organizations can enhance faculty retention rates. In contrast, the structural approach examines variables that can be modified by organizational leaders (e.g., levels of autonomy, amount of support for innovative initiatives). Thus, the structural approach is more likely to identify specific ways to reorganize colleges, which may, in turn, enhance satisfaction and intent-to-stay. Findings can provide information about specific organizational structures where college leaders could intervene propitiously in order to enhance institutional faculty retention rates.

Expectancy theory suggests that faculty members are less likely to seek employment elsewhere when their structural expectations are met. Research on faculty values and academic culture (Austin, 1990; Birnbaum, 1988; Vaughan, 1991) suggests that these structural expectations include autonomy, support for innovation, and collegial communication.

Autonomy is defined as the ability of employees to set organizational goals and to structure the organization to maximize professional concerns (Price, 1997). The

importance of autonomy as a structural variable in studies of professional work has been well documented (Etzioni, 1969; Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Lawler, 1994). Spector's (1986) meta-analysis revealed that autonomy is related to lower levels of employee turnover and absenteeism, and to higher levels of motivation and job satisfaction. Autonomous work may satisfy higher-order needs for achievement and accomplishment (Turner & Lawrence, 1965).

Baldridge, Curtis, Ecker, and Riley (1973) characterized faculty autonomy as "the ability of professionals to decide work patterns, to actively participate in major academic decision-making, to have work evaluated by professional peers, and to be relatively free of bureaucratic regulations and restrictions" (p. 536). Faculty autonomy in community colleges may be constrained by curricular expectations from the professional associations that accredit many of their academic programs. Outside influence on curriculum tends to be higher in community colleges than in other sectors of higher education (Mazzoli, 2000). Autonomy may also be limited by norms of top-down leadership and collective bargaining agreements that precisely specify the range of faculty activities.

Support for innovation refers to the extent to which an organization supports change-related activity among its members (Siegel & Kaemmerer, 1978). Organizational commitment and satisfaction may depend, in large part, on the extent to which people perceive their organizations as supportive of new ideas and processes (Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis-LaMastro, 1990). Jansen and Chandler (1994) investigated relationships between support for innovation and hospital employees' perceptions and attitudes toward work. Employees who perceived high levels of support for innovation reported

substantially less role conflict and higher levels of involvement and satisfaction with the organization.

Higher education organizations provide a range of support structures to encourage faculty innovation. Professional development programs, teaching institutes, and mentoring relationships can help faculty make important changes in curriculum and pedagogy. Community colleges that support innovation may be conceptualized as learning organizations, where faculty members engage in continuous self-study to identify processes and procedures that can improve performance (O'Banion, 1997). There is some concern, however, about whether traditional, top-down forms of community college governance are consistent with support for innovation and organizational learning (Kezar, 1998; Thaxter & Graham, 1999).

Communication refers to "the degree to which information is transmitted among the members of an organization" (Price, 1997, p. 349). A communication network "consists of interconnected individuals who are linked by patterned communication flows" (Rogers & Kincaid, 1981, p. 82). Put simply, a communication network identifies who speaks to whom in the college.

Scott et al. (1999, p. 404) asserted that "communication inadequacies in an organization, such as employees not receiving necessary information or not being able to express themselves freely, may well contribute to their intent to leave." Alternatively, open communication may serve as a mechanism for integration into the organization, which can enhance intent-to-stay.

Open communication has long been considered an important element in faculty culture (Austin, 1990; Millett, 1962). It facilitates the creation of a "congenial and

sympathetic company of scholars in which friendships, good conversation, and mutual aid can flourish" (Bowen & Schuster, 1986, p. 55). Some authors have noted the importance of open communication for maintaining effective performance in the academic divisions and departments of community colleges (Coats, 2000). Communication openness, however, may be constrained where there is distrust between administrators and faculty. Here, people do not freely express conflicting views; instead, they utilize highly formalized means of conflict resolution, such as grievance procedures.

The Study

This study addressed the following research questions:

- To what extent is **autonomy** associated with faculty turnover intent?
- To what extent is **organizational support for innovation** associated with faculty turnover intent?
- To what extent is **open communication** associated with faculty turnover intent?

The study population included all full-time faculty members employed by an urban community college. The site was selected based on its urban location, its structural differentiation between workforce development and transfer faculty, and its recent faculty unionization. The college has a long-standing tradition for innovative academic programming and student services, but has recently encountered faculty morale problems.

A cross-sectional survey was distributed to all full-time faculty members (N=226) through the internal mail system of the college. Responses were returned directly to the researcher; no institutional personnel had access to the responses. Analyses are based on useable responses from 65.9% (N=149) of the population.

Four measures were included in the survey:

1. Price and Mueller's (Kim et al., 1996) measure of **turnover intent**
2. Breaugh's (1985) measure of **work autonomy**
3. Siegel and Kaemmerer's (1978) **organizational support for innovation** measure
4. O'Reilly & Roberts's (1976) measure of **communication openness**

The study utilized a four-item **turnover intent** measure developed by Price and Mueller (1986; Kim et al., 1996). According to Fishbein and Ajzen (1975, p. 369), "The best single predictor of an individual's behavior will be a measure of his intention to perform that behavior." Empirical evidence supports the position that turnover intent is strongly and consistently related to voluntary employee turnover (Steel & Ovalle, 1984). Turnover intent constitutes the last in a sequence of withdrawal cognition in which an employee actively considers quitting and begins searching for alternative employment (Tett & Meyer, 1993). Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the Price and Mueller turnover intent measure have ranged from .85 to .90 (Kim et al., 1996; Price & Kim, 1993).

This study utilized a nine-item **autonomy** measure developed by Breaugh (1985). To test the validity of the measure, Breaugh and Becker (1987) utilized an experimental design to examine the extent to which self-reports of autonomy corresponded with experimentally manipulated levels of autonomy. They found high levels of correspondence between experimental conditions and self-reports. Five studies report coefficient alphas that range from .85 to .92 for each dimension; these values support assertions of reliability of the measure (Breaugh, 1985; 1989; Breaugh & Becker, 1987).

This study utilized Siegel and Kaemmerer's (1978) **organizational support for innovation** scale. Several studies have examined the validity and reliability of this measure. Siegel and Kaemmerer (1978) found that the instrument successfully differentiated schools with traditional missions and schools with innovative missions.

Similarly, Orpen (1990) utilized a consensual reputation method to identify innovative and non-innovative engineering firms. Employees in innovative engineering firms had significantly higher support for innovation scores than engineers in firms that were not identified as innovative. Siegel and Kaemmerer (1978) reported split-half reliability coefficients that ranged from .86 to .94.

This study utilized O'Reilly and Roberts's (1976) **communication openness** scale, which measures the extent to which organizational members feel free to exchange ideas with one another. O'Reilly and Roberts (1976) found significant, positive relationships between openness scores and self-reported frequencies of interpersonal communication with co-workers. The reported alpha coefficient (.85) supports the reliability of the measure.

INSERT TABLE 1

Sample items for each of the four measures are included in Table 1. The survey also included items for six control variables: gender, education level, age, academic division, years in profession, and years in current institution.

A majority (57.7%) of the respondents were female. Education levels were considered in terms of highest degree obtained; 80.5% held the master's degree, and 19.5% held a doctoral degree. Age data revealed that 34.8% of respondents were in their 20s or 30s, 48.9% in their 40s, and 16.3% in their 50s or higher. Nearly three-fourths (74.0%) of the respondents taught in general education divisions; 26.0% taught in one of the workforce development divisions. Respondents reported a range of teaching experience: 39.2% had 7 or fewer years of teaching experience, 27.7% had 8 to 10 years,

and 33.1% had 11 or more years. One-fourth (25.2%) of respondents had worked in their current institution for 7 or fewer years; 44.2% had worked in their current institution for 8 to 10 years; and 30.6% had worked in their current institution for 11 years or more.

Findings

Turnover intent in this institution was low to moderate. Respondents reported high levels of autonomy and communication openness. Support for innovation scores were moderate to high. Means and standard deviations are reported in Table 2.

INSERT TABLE 2

Correlation coefficients indicated a strong, negative relationship (R=-.686) between organizational support for innovation and faculty turnover intent. Faculty who perceived high levels of support for innovation reported lower levels of turnover intent. Moderate, negative relationships were found for collegial communication (R=-.595) and work autonomy (R=-.436). Faculty who perceived high levels of communication openness tended to report lower levels of turnover intent. Faculty who reported high levels of autonomy also tended to report lower levels of turnover intent.

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that faculty with 11 or more years of teaching experience had higher levels of turnover intent than faculty with 7 or fewer years of experience (F=3.522, p=.032). However, after a Bonferroni correction to reduce vulnerability to type I error (Keppel, 1991), the result was not statistically significant. Additional one-way ANOVAs showed that turnover intent did not differ

significantly on the basis of gender, age, education level, academic division (workforce development vs. general education), or years at current institution.

A block-wise linear regression analysis was used to examine the effects of variables simultaneously. Structural variables entered the model first, followed by demographic control variables. The final model explained 54.3% of the variation in turnover intent. Results are summarized in Table 3.

INSERT TABLE 3

Initially, the beta coefficients for support for innovation (β=-.568) and collegial communication (β=-.277) were statistically significant. Work autonomy, however, did not have a unique effect on turnover intent. After the demographic control variables entered the model, support for innovation remained statistically significant (β=-.615); however, collegial communication did not demonstrate a unique effect on turnover intent after controlling for demographic characteristics of the sample. Work autonomy remained non-significant.

Respondents aged 20-39 reported higher levels of turnover intent than their older colleagues (β=-.197). Here, early career stressors may cause some faculty to rethink their commitment to college teaching. Alternatively, younger respondents could view community college teaching as a temporary occupation on a career trajectory toward employment in other sectors of higher education.

Discussion

Variance initially attributed to collegial communication and work autonomy was subsumed by support for innovation. Support for innovation appears to capture some of the same effect on turnover intent as autonomy and collegial communication. This suggests that college leaders could target innovation as a vehicle for enhancing autonomy, communication, and institutional faculty retention rates.

Results suggest the importance of communicating and clarifying processes and procedures associated with change. Senior faculty and administrators can initiate conversations with new faculty members, where bureaucratic procedures for change are specified, and personal and financial supports for change are identified. A "change-mentor" program could be designed, where faculty and staff members with experience in academic/curricular innovation work closely with a new faculty member on a change project. These projects may enhance motivation and commitment, and provide opportunities for professional growth for early career faculty.

Results also suggest the need for faculty involvement in institutional governance and decision making, particularly when the focus is organizational change. Faculty members who participate in change-related decision making may begin to perceive congruence between their individual goals and the goals of the institution. Faculty members who feel a sense of ownership toward institutional goals may develop strong affective bonds with the institution and be less likely to seek employment elsewhere.

In addition to faculty participation in macro-change efforts, each faculty member could be authorized to search for innovations individually or as part of a team. The institution could provide support for smaller-scale innovations, so long as the innovation advances institutional, rather than idiosyncratic, goals. Authority to search for new ideas

would be decentralized to the faculty, but their searches would cohere around common goals supported by the institution.

Conclusion

The maintenance of strong faculties is a vital concern of academic administration. As Bowen and Shuster (1986) noted, "the excellence of higher education is a function of the people it is able to enlist and retain on its faculties" (p. 1). Studies show, however, that two-fifths of faculty members seriously consider leaving the profession (Cavenar, Dill, & Bethune, 1987; Sanderson, Phua, & Herda, 2000). Though the literature on community college faculty is growing (Gahn & Twombly, 2001; Fugate & Amey, 2000; Townsend & LaPaglia, 2000; Valadez & Anthony, 2001), faculty turnover intent has not been studied extensively. Current research provides few insights for administrators who seek to improve faculty retention rates.

This study suggests that organizational support for innovation may enhance faculty retention rates. Community college leaders can use structures and processes associated with change as vehicles for enhancing autonomy, facilitating open communication, and reducing turnover intent.

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Table 1. Sample Items

Turnover Intent (Kim, et al., 1996)
- I plan to leave this college as soon as possible.
- I would be reluctant to leave this college (reverse-scored item).

Autonomy (Breaugh, 1985)
- I am allowed to decide how to go about getting my job done (the methods to use).
- I have some control over the sequencing of my work activities (when I do what).

Support for Innovation (Siegel & Kaemmerer, 1978)
- This organization is always moving towards the development of new answers.
- New ideas can come from anywhere in this organization and be equally well received.

Communication Openness (O'Reilly & Roberts, 1976)
- Communication in this college is very open.
- It is easy to talk openly to all of my co-workers in this college.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations

	MINIMUM	MAXIMUM	MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION
Turnover Intent	1=strongly disagree	5=strongly agree	2.27	0.64
Autonomy	1=strongly disagree	7=strongly agree	5.76	0.74
Support for Innovation	1=strongly disagree	6=strongly agree	4.49	0.98
Communication Openness	1=strongly disagree	7=strongly agree	5.85	0.83

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Table 3. Regression Analysis

Model 1	**Beta**	**t**	**Sig.**
Support/Innovation	-.568	-6.37	.000
Comm. Openness	-.277	-2.23	.028
Autonomy	.072	0.68	.501
Model 2			
Support/Innovation	-.615	-6.58	.000
Comm. Openness	-.204	-1.57	.121
Autonomy	.014	0.13	.896
Gender: Male	-.094	-1.35	.179
Education: Doctorate	.036	0.50	.618
Age: 40-49 *	-.197	-2.01	.048
Age: 50+ *	-.083	-0.75	.455
Division: Gen. Ed.	.058	0.83	.409
Yrs./Prof: 8-10 **	-.151	-1.23	.224
Yrs./Prof: 11+ **	-.031	-0.30	.762
Yrs./College: 8-10 **	.112	0.92	.361
Yrs./College: 11+ **	-.042	-0.30	.765

* Reference Group: Age 20-39
** Reference Group: 7 years or fewer

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